

THE PRODUCT PUBLICATION OF THE U.S. ARCHITECTURAL MARKET

Architectural PRODUCTS

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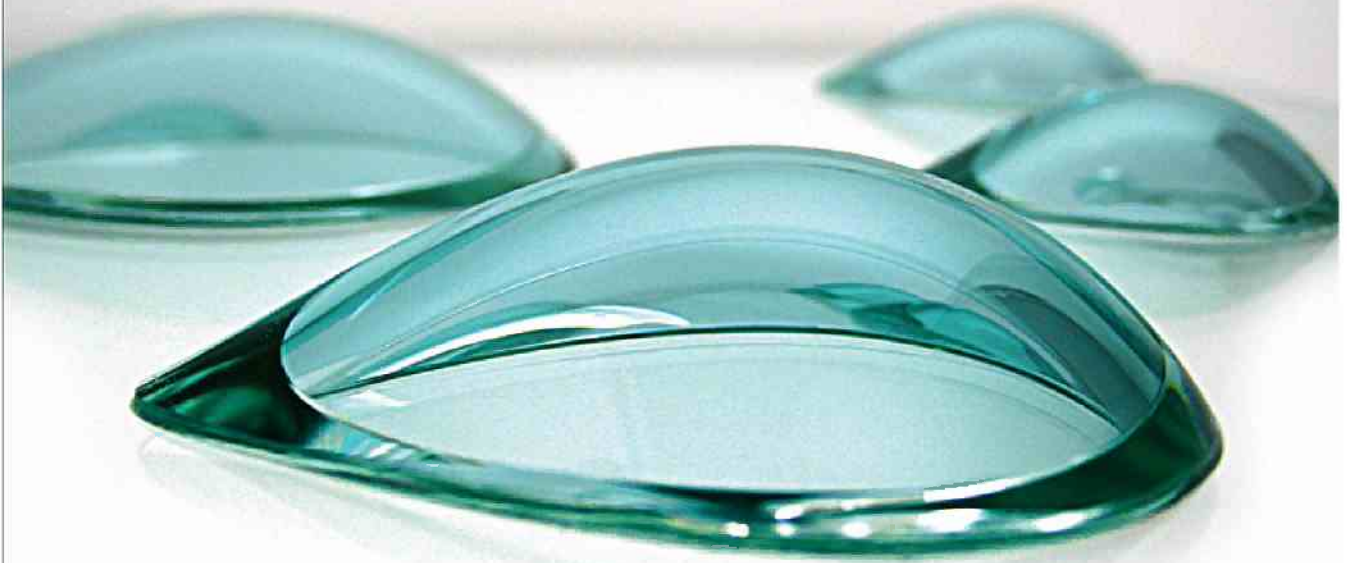
INNOVATION: Innovations in glass are beginning to open up new possibilities, offering a variety of custom styles that allow architects and designers creative options for dividing space while at the same time maximizing openness and opportunities for daylighting.

ACHIEVING LEED

Highland Sam J. Racadio Library & Environmental Learning Center, Highland, Calif.

PROJECT DECONSTRUCTION

St. Elizabeth Boardman Health Center, Boardman, Ohio



APPLICATION: See how 'Spheres', as envisioned by Newman Cavender and Doane Architects, add a distinct look to the Denver News Agency. **(PAGE 58)**

True Colors of Green Labels: How to Distinguish Between Fact and Fiction

Never before has the sustainability marketplace been as saturated in greenwashing tactics than it is today. A deluge of so-called "green" and "environmentally preferable" products has hit store shelves and catalogs all across the globe, leaving consumers more confused and skeptical than ever before. According to a 2009 report by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, the number of "green" products sold by retailers jumped an average of 79% between 2007 and 2009; of those products, 98% made environmental claims that were misleading, irrelevant, unsubstantiated, or altogether false. Even worse, 21% of products surveyed in the study bore labels claiming the products were third-party certified when, in fact, they were not.

So how is a specifier to know which products are legitimately "green" and which are phonies? "Unfortunately, uncorroborated eco-claims abound in the marketplace, so it's critical to dig below the surface," says Henning Bloech, executive director of the GreenGuard Environmental Institute, an industry-independent organization that works to protect human health by improving indoor air quality. "That means looking beyond the eye-catching labels and product packaging and focusing instead on whether the product has been independently evaluated and certified."

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The immediate problem is that not all certifications and "green" labels are created equal. Many are based on biased research, flawed testing and inconclusive data; others are based on claims that are simply invented and propagated by marketers. Only a few are reliable, transparent, scientifically supported, and based on publicly available test methods and standards.

A good rule of thumb when looking for a certified product is to choose one that has been evaluated by a credible third party—preferably one that has earned ISO/IEC Guide 65 accreditation, which indicates that the certifier has met stringent quality management requirements as set forth by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Third-party certifiers conduct impartial testing, auditing, and/or data analysis. Unlike first- and second-party certifiers, third-party organizations have no affiliation with the companies requesting certification, nor do they have vested interests in the products they certify. Therefore, they are the most reliable.

Third-party certifications are especially important when looking for building and design products that are sustainable and contribute to healthier environments, according to award-winning architect Larry Speck, principal at

PageSouthernlandPage and fellow of the American Institute of Architects, what architects look for, is some third-party, unbiased source that can test products in a scientific way and give specifiers feedback. "That's the only legitimate way for me to know that what I'm putting into the building is healthy," says Speck.

WHY A SINGLE "UBER" GREEN LABEL IS NOT THE ANSWER

Every so often, the notion of a stand-alone, all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all green label comes up in conversation as a panacea for greenwashing. Those who favor this idea believe that a single umbrella label—certifying everything from alternative fuel vehicles to organic foods—would make it easier for consumers to pick and choose "green" products.

According to Bloech, however, the idea of an "uber" label is dangerously flawed. "Certification is a highly complex process—it's not as simple as merely rating a product 'green' on a scale of one to ten," he says. "Could you imagine certifying dolphin-safe tuna to the same criteria as household paint? The idea is preposterous. Products serve different needs based on their application, and consumers have varying preferences for products. So instituting a single one-size-fits-all green label would actually worsen greenwashing rather than remedy it."

MORE LABELS, MORE CHOICES,

MORE TARGETED EXPERTISE

Performance criteria for third-party certifications can vary greatly depending on the type of product at hand. Some certifications focus on a single attribute, such as indoor air quality (e.g., GreenGuard Certification), while others focus on an array of attributes, such as energy efficiency, water usage, and use of recycled content (e.g., NSF-140).

While multi-attribute certifications can certainly be beneficial for understanding a product's overall "greenness," it is important to remember that different green building projects dictate different green performance criteria. For example, a built environment intended for sensitive population groups—like children, the elderly, or the sick—probably won't have the same environmental needs as a built environment intended for the manufacture of light bulbs. Similarly, green products have varying performance needs depending on the products' intended use. This is why multiple specialty, or single-attribute, certifications are still important.

Penny Bonda, green interior designer and partner at sustainability consulting firm EcoImpact, draws an analogy: "Say you had pain in your foot. Could you go to a general practitioner to have it treated? Probably. But wouldn't



ABOVE: A chair is tested in the labs of Air Quality Science, an official GreenGuard partner. In this case, the chamber measures VOC and formaldehyde emissions, as well as respirable particles and similar pollutants of concern.

you rather go to someone who specializes (treating foot pain, like a podiatrist)? The same idea applies to certifications. Certainly, explore multi-attribute programs—but don't discount the importance of single-attribute programs."

Speck agrees: "While it might take less effort to choose a product that's been stamped with a multi-attribute certification label, there is tremendous value in being able to choose products that have been certified in single niche performance areas. The more choices there are on the marketplace, the higher the quality—that's just the nature of competition." ■